

REVIEW: EDWIN ARDENER, *THE VOICE OF PROPHECY* (NEW EDITION, 2018)

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Ardener, Edwin, 2018. *The Voice of Prophecy and Other Essays*, second and expanded edition New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books.

Edwin Ardener is one of the leading figures of the British anthropological discourse. Mostly known for his multiple fieldwork projects in Cameroon, Ardener's scope of interest was nonetheless concerned with issues going far beyond the classic anthropological areas such as terms of kinship, marriage, or linguistics. For example, he is considered the anthropological pioneer of women's studies that were emerging in the mid-1970s. The way of thinking of women as a 'muted' and insufficiently researched group proved his analyses prophetic for the subsequent development of the new branch of Social Sciences. Also considered a founding father of divorce and gender studies, and an innovator in social constructivism, Ardener has left a rich and various intellectual legacy.

The first edition of the book *The Voice of Prophecy*, which was published in 1989 by Blackwell, is a selection of seminal works by Ardener. That cross-sectional collection of essays, in the second edition published by Berghahn Books, is complemented by a few other pieces of writing not included in the first edition. This way the second edition meets the academic need for an even more comprehensive companion to Ardener.

Obviously, this 'gift' of Ardener's insight shall nowadays be considered from the point of view of the contemporary concerns of the discipline. Just to give a few examples of these questions, we may briefly mention the ongoing refugee crisis in Europe, the rise of xenophobic-oriented national politics, questions of human life and social processes seen from the perspective of the bio-political paradigm (gender, fertility, demography, euthanasia and abortion, etc.), women's rights and human rights in general, and the growing importance of the need to understand the very nature of political borders, which indeed are purely social constructs.

The second and expanded edition of the book *The Voice of Prophecy* is a perfect excuse to recall some essential terms of social anthropology, such as ethnographic research or ethnicity, and introduce a discussion on how they still matter as analytical categories in the contemporary discourse on human societies. The opening foreword was written by Michael Herzfeld, and the introductory part and acknowledgment were elaborated by Malcolm Chapman. A lot of light on Ardener's academic life and work is shed also in the two 'Postscript' parts, prepared by Kirsten Hastrup ('The Prophetic Condition') and Maryon McDonald ('Towards a Rigorously Empirical Anthropology'). Finally, one can find an Appendix that follows the 'Postscripts' – a bibliography of Edwin Ardener's works. The chapters of the book are entwined with Ardener's comments on the case studies from Cameroon, and this provokes some clamant questions. To what extent are the current cultural identities and communities still produced or reproduced on the basis of the colonial and postcolonial encounters? Now, when Orientalism was deconstructed by Said as a sheer knowledge construct, is it still a

hegemonic tool? What is a social change, and how it is in interplay with the heterogeneity of people's cultures?

When did the anthropology of traditional societies became the anthropology of population? is an another question worth asking. 'Let us now take the provisional position that if a certain "demographic consciousness" is a feature of modern societies, the relative absence of it would correspondingly be one aspect of societies thought of roughly as "ethnic" or "tribal»" (p. 117). When statistical surveys were made before the scientific methods was implemented on a mass scale, they were often, as Ardener puts it, distorted:

To go still further, then, the inadequately or erroneously documented pre-modern polities are not easily distinguished in principle from societies in which no statistics are formally taken, but which nevertheless have elicitable images of how their group is constructed and how situated in time and space (ibid.).

Another major issue, briefly mentioned above, is the question of women in human societies in general, and their importance in various age cohorts in particular. The author writes,

[h]ere is a human group that forms half of any population and is even in majority at certain ages: particularly at those which for so many societies are the 'ruling' ages – the years after forty. Yet however apparently competently the female population has been studied in any particular society, the results in understanding are surprisingly slight, and even tedious (p. 72).

Ardener's works seem to be the only ones to catch all these major shifts in thinking about people, societies, culture, and science. Yet, it is the qualitative paradigm that is the key to discovering the meanings rooted in human reality and to reconstructing the dynamics of what comes after post-colonialism. Anthropology is not about predicting the future, but about making accessible for a conceptual apprehension various human worlds, which are volatile but perfectly explicable in contexts of their cultures. The social realm is unpredictable, and it seems that Social Sciences are the key to dealing with this unpredictability when tradition is barely conforming. Many believe we could 'go back' to a moment in the past when things were in 'the right place', perceiving the past as the major warrant of personal tranquility. We must not be misled – no large geopolitical unit was ever closed, the world's main roads were never clogged enough not to allow people to drift and roam, nations never separated – always in mixture and constantly in viral set-ups, and we cannot predict their directions.

The later generations of social anthropologists have been struggling to come to terms with how much the classic anthropology developed within already non-existing societies has still to offer and to which extent it remains sufficient. Thus this book is a compulsory reading for anthropologists and strongly recommended for those who search for an original, uncompromised, and extraordinary quality of social thought.